

THE COUNTRY SPECTATOR.

NUMBER III.

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When SATURN first began to rule,
 And JOVE was hardly sent to school,
 How happy was a Country life !
 How free from wickedness and strife !
 Then each man liv'd upon his farm,
 And thought and did no mortal harm :
 But now, whatever poets write,
 'Tis sure the case is alter'd quite.

JENYNS.

THERE are some qualifications for the office of a Country Spectator, to which I may lay claim without incurring the imputation of vanity. I am, in the modern phrase, a great *Pedestrian*; and I have constantly employed this talent in visiting the villages adjacent to the various towns, in which I have resided. Here I have looked for Nature undisguised by the garb, in which she is

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frequently tricked out by Fashion and Folly : I have endeavoured to discover her in her places of retreat ; and have often encountered fatigue and inclement weather, in hope of being amply compensated by finding the object of my search. Having, however, been frequently disappointed, it is my custom to carry in my pocket some favourite author ; so that, if the people, whom I visit, are averse to communication with me, or have little to communicate, I am not reduced to distress for want of entertainment ; a precaution similar to that, which every wise General will take, before he quits his own territory. Thus equipped for an expedition I sally forth in quest of adventures. If on my entering the village, the place of my destination, nobody appears to notice me as I pass along, I consider it as a sure presage, that I must have recourse to my book : I conclude that the villagers are accustomed to see Strangers, and begin to fear, that they have so far contracted the habits of the great world, as to have little left for my observation, which I might not have met with at home. But when the children run out of their habitations to view me as I pass by, and seem, by a vacant stare, to consider me as a very extraordinary spectacle, I immediately form great hopes, that I have steered a lucky course and that some interesting scene awaits my contemplation.—The place of my resort on these occasions is the village inn ; for I not only have a better title to admission into a public,

into a private, house, but I expect to find amidst the motley company, who are used to assemble at the former, a much greater variety of characters, than I could hope to meet with in a single family. From the moment of my stepping over the threshold of the door, I divest myself of all ensigns of my importance : I endeavour to talk with my fellow-guests in their own strain ; and am not a little delighted, when I can discover the genuine ore of Nature unmixed with the alloy, with which Custom is apt to debase it.

DURING the course of last week, I set out on one of these my rural excursions ; and tho' I did not meet with any adventures particularly interesting, yet as the walk was undertaken in my *official capacity*, I resolved that the reflections, to which it gave rise, should be the subject of my next week's speculation.

THE simplicity and innocence displayed in rural life have been a favorite theme of the Poets, both ancient and modern : and the evanescent traces of happiness and virtue, which were discovered amidst the solitude and retirement of the Country, seem to have suggested to the bards of *Greece* the notion of a Golden Age, existing in the infancy of the world. The appearances, which society must have exhibited in its earlier periods, were highly favorable to this opinion. The rudeness and simplicity of pastoral life could have discovered none of those vices,

which arise from excessive refinement and from the intercourse, with which men are mutually connected in a more advanced state of society. It was natural, that they who felt the ardours of poetic genius, and who were impressed with sublime ideas of the dignity of virtue, should immediately embrace a doctrine so well adapted to their purpose. Benevolence has ever been nearly allied to Poesy ; and the Muses have considered innocence and happiness as the most delightful themes, on which they could dwell. Satire and invective, tho' gradually introduced into verse, are not subjects which allow scope to poetic embellishment : vice and misery do not admit the ornaments of fiction, or inspire the delirium of Fancy ; they do not exalt, but depress, the mind, which contemplates them : satire, therefore, has rarely been the talent of those, who have been eminent for the grasp of their powers, or amiable for the goodness of their hearts.

But in the earlier periods of Society, from the silence of historical evidence, events are necessarily obscured by tradition, or are left entirely to be supplied by fable : and there exists in the human mind, a propensity to form comparisons between the virtue of present and past ages, which is highly unfavorable to the former. It is not only in the decline of life, that Man is *laudator temporis aëli*, an advocate for the happiness and innocence of former times ; the same principle operates in various degrees during

the whole of his existence ; in manhood he looks back with pleasure on the joys, which illuminated his youth ; and in every stage of life he is willing to believe, that the world is now less virtuous and happy than it was in the preceding period : the obvious result of this belief is the idea of a Golden Age.

By such arguments, perhaps, we may account for the origin and progress of an opinion, which once generally prevailed, and which even in our own days is rather diverted into a different channel, than wholly laid aside. There are some, who still declaim on the quiet and felicity of retirement, and who would fondly persuade us, that *Astrea* still inhabits the earth, and that *Britain* has its *Arcadia*. The writers of rhapsody and romance are uniformly of this class ; so that he, who gathers his notions of mankind from *their* representations, will imagine that all vices are concentrated in the metropolis, and that virtue reigns without interruption in fields and groves. Modern poets, also, generally adhere to the same side of the question, from the principle before laid down : some of them, however, have drawn pictures of Country life, which bear so little resemblance to each other, that they deserve our attention. In the DESERTED VILLAGE we have a view of rural innocence, which few men, I believe, can pretend to have witnessed ; while in the VILLAGE of Mr. *Crabbe* we are taught to imagine, that Coun-

try life abounds in all the vices, which disturb Society, and that even these are heightened by ferocity and barbarism. When the same fact is so differently stated, we are certain, that misrepresentation is at least on one side of the question, and we may suspect, that it is on both.

IT is not my design to attempt the decision of a dispute, in which opposite conclusions have been drawn by different observers: yet, were we to incline to the latter opinion under certain restrictions, it need not raise a sigh in the breast of Humanity, or give cause of dissatisfaction to the admirers of rural life.

A LATE celebrated Painter has ingeniously remarked that “^b every seminary of learning may be said to be surrounded with an atmosphere of floating knowledge, whence every mind may imbibe somewhat congenial to its own original conceptions.” This observation, *mutatis mutandis*, may be transferred from science to morals. I consider every great city, as being encompassed with an atmosphere of floating follies, from which every mind may collect somewhat congenial to its own depravity. Round the metropolis this atmosphere is strongly impregnated with vice and corruption; and tho’ its density decreases in proportion to the distance of the place, its influence is felt

* Disc. before the ROYAL ACADEMY. p. 11.

for several miles, before it is entirely lost. But before this event takes place, we find ourselves, perhaps, far advanced within the atmosphere of some other large town, which produces nearly the same effect on morals and society; and thus the simplicity of Country life is always exposed to the operation of an external cause. Every village has its respective metropolis, from which it experiences effects not unlike those, which the Capital produces on the nation at large.

IT is not, however, to be imagined, that these effects are altogether unfavourable to the cause of virtue. While men live remote from society and feel no wish beyond that of supplying the wants of Nature, it must, indeed, be allowed, that they are not exposed to so many temptations, as those, with which they are beset amidst the varying interests and ceaseless competitions of social life. But tho' their vices have found little encouragement amidst the languor of solitude, their virtues also must have been circumscribed in the same proportion. He, who flees from the world with a design of preserving his integrity, must have formed as high an idea of his own strength, as he has conceived a degrading notion of the weakness of others. Society is the sphere of good as well as of evil: active life calls forth in us an exertion of our powers, and holds out to us not only allurements to folly and guilt, but incentives

to wisdom and virtue : it awakens in us the dormant principles of the soul, and excites us from that torpor and stagnation, which render us alike burthen-some to ourselves and useless to others. If, therefore, simplicity is no longer the appendage of rural life, if the anxieties and cares, which disturb the busy world, have forced their way into the privacy of retreat, if innocence is no longer to be found in grots and bowers, let not Benevolence lament the change, or complain of increasing corruption : happiness consists not merely in exemption from pain, and virtue is more than a negation of vice.

R.

To Correspondents.

Some letters having been sent to the C. S. which relate only to the domestic concerns of their authors, Correspondents are informed, that no communications will hereafter be noticed, of which the postage is not paid. A hint of this kind was given in N^o. 1 : and there is a trite maxim, which is perfectly applicable to the above-mentioned epistles : *Quod non opus est, esse carum est.* Gentlemen, who are not disposed to amuse themselves at the expence of the C. S. but really wish well to his undertaking, are requested to send their contributions to

"The Editor of the C. S.
at Messrs. Mozley & Co.
Gainsborough."